

# **SCENERY PAINTING FOR THE AMATEUR MUSICAL THEATRE and PANTOMIME**

**Extracts from.....PAINTING SCENERY FOR THE AMATEUR STAGE By Brian Willis**

## **CHAPTER ONE MEETINGS AND THE SPACE**

Right at the start of the gestation period of a production you, as the scenic artist, need to arm yourself with some facts.

### **ANALYSING THE SCRIPT**

First of all get hold of a copy of the script and read it.

What are the scenes? Are they happy or sad? Any ideas that sing out at you from the story?

Could you have scenes of contrasting hues or tones following each other? The dark dank miserable cool neutral greys and blues of a prison cell of Nottingham Castle followed by the light and spring-like greens of a Sherwood Forest Glade.

What is the time of year when the action place?

In what era does the play take place? Perhaps there's some research to be done; photos to be dug out of the library; Travel Brochures to be sent for (Pity the poor old White Horse Inn on the shores of Lake Wolfgang in Northern Austria!)

### **MEETING THE PRODUCTION TEAM**

Now you know what the play is about, the next move is to attend production meetings where ideally the following are present .....Producer; Set designer (if that's not you); Set builder; Costumes; Lighting; Props; Stage Manager; Production Manager;

Take a sketchpad; the script; a notebook and your diary.

With everyone joining in, it saves you a lot of phone calls to recheck things later.- nevertheless note down all their phone numbers.

Compromise is the word that springs to mind during these meetings!

From these gatherings you need to know.....

### **BUILDING CONTACT**

Who is in charge of building the scenery? Quite often in amateur circles where everyone mucks in, the scenery is made by a gang resulting in different people going off at a tangent. This becomes a shambles unless one person is the figurehead (and even that sometimes leads to dissension in the ranks) But you, as the scenic artist, need to have one main contact through which to work.

### **THE SCENERY REQUIREMENTS**

Where is the scenery to be made and painted?

What is each scene to depict and in what order? (Yes I know you've read the script but the Producer may have altered, added, dropped, things)

Where does the interval fit in this list?

Amount of stage space each scene will take? i.e. are any of them front cloths when scene changes can take place behind?

Any permanent flats; wings; cloths? (I.e. not changed during the show)

Any permanent painted borders? (Lighting person will probably get grumpy about these)

Any scenery to surround the orchestra? An orchestra "pit" often appears as a last minute extra once the scenery gets into the hall.

Costume colours? (In amateur productions probably not know until it's too late to effect your choice of colours)

Does the producer want a colour theme running through a particular scene? (or even the whole show)

List the elements in each scene which MUST be included.....Items referred to by the actors, or called for by the action, such as .... the picture on the wall; the bridge in the forest; a sign above the bar; etc.

And confirm where these items have to be placed.

## **THE THEATRE/HALL TIMETABLE**

Date of "Get in."

Date of technical rehearsal

Date of dress rehearsal

Date show starts

Who used the hall/theatre before us. Are we going to be struggling to get in whilst they are struggling to get out?

**Are we going to be struggling to get in whilst they are struggling to get out?**

When are the cast to rehearse on the stage? i.e. when is it free for you to get onto the stage to paint. (Allowing also time for the paint to dry before letting the cast loose near it.)

This may seem a bit early to be asking that, but being forewarned helps you decide what you can leave to be pulled together when the set has been erected on the stage.

## **WHAT TO LOOK FOR AT THE HALL/THEATRE**

Now lets go and have a look at the place where the show is to take place. Anyway it's always politic to make yourself known to the manager; caretaker; key holder; receptionist; etc.

If you are also the designer than a visit to the theatre/hall came well before any meetings, production or otherwise. But for this booklet I'm assuming all!! you have to do is paint the scenery.

*This chapter continues in the book but I haven't time to transfer it all here.*

## **CHAPTER TWO ARTWORK (The first page only)**

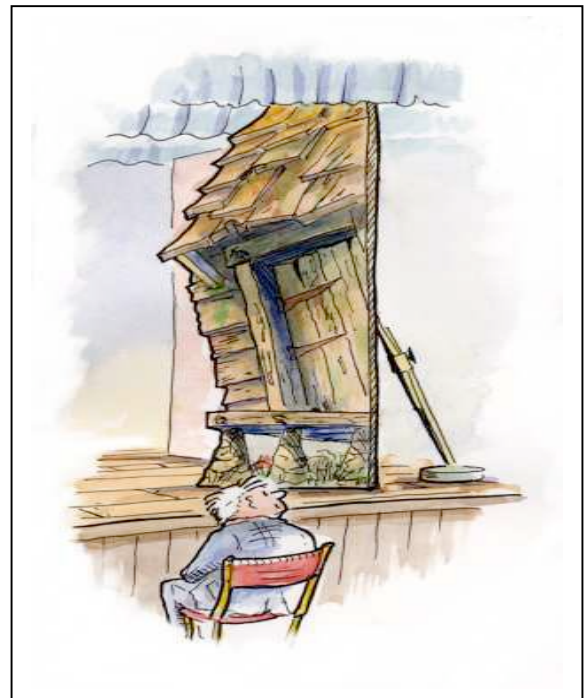
The ideas in this section, although concentrating on backcloths, apply equally as well to flats and ground rows.

Preliminary work varies from group to group. Sometimes I am presented with a complete scale model of all the sets required together with working drawings. At other times I do all the preparation work. Groups differ in who does what.

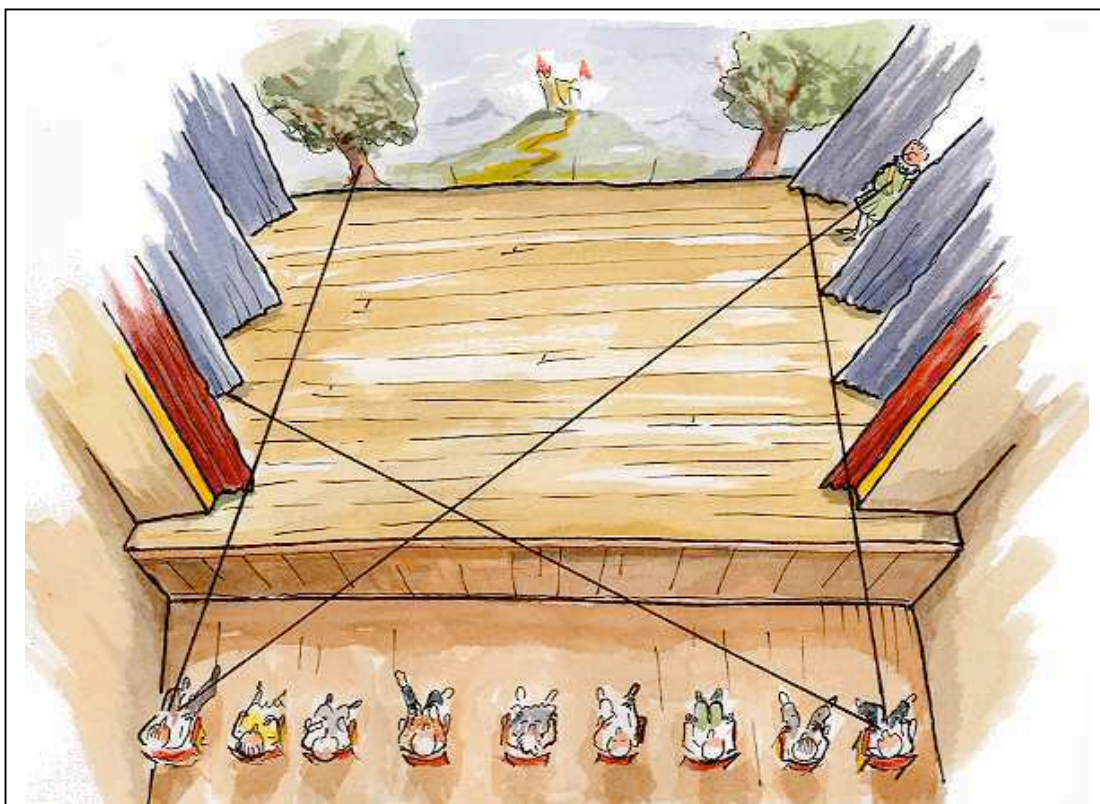
## **WHAT ELEMENTS ARE IN THE SCENE?**

For me, the first stage in the drawing process is to write down on a large sheet of paper all the possible elements that could go into a scene.....Let's take the Panto "Village Green". I will write down things such as ..... thatch; dormer windows; diamond window panes; roses over the door; pond; stocks; pub sign; etc. (Not forgetting of course the items I know have to be put in as they are an integral part of the story.... "King John's Castle in the distance" type of thing.) From this list I then fiddle about for days trying out ideas- I don't put in every item from my list. However I eventually come up with a plan of sorts, including the wings as well of course.

As in "Easel Art" in order to show depth I rarely have items flat-on to the audience. An angle gives you an excuse to have different planes "lit" differently in your scene. You can have even more optical fun by designing the corner of, say, a "barn" on a Wing which, in its turn, is set at an angle to the audience.

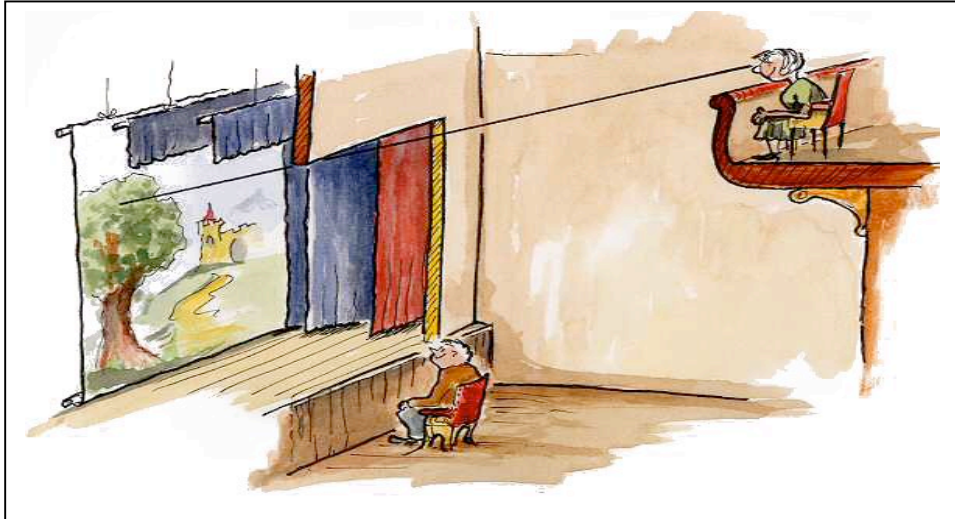


**THE STAGE** What do we need to know from looking at the stage? (Some of these queries can be left until nearer the time- we don't want the management committee panicking too soon that you're going to ruin the place!) **The sight lines.** *This is discussed here from the point of view of the scenic artist and not the SM; Director; or Producer, who will be more interested in masking from these "extreme" seats.* In our case it helps to know the cut-off point to plot the "safe" area on the cloths and wings. These are the areas that can be seen by everyone in the audience. And it's within the confines of these areas that you can place your important scenic elements.



For instance I recently designed/painted for a production of the Wizard of Oz and for Munchkinland had Dorothy's house Downstage Audience Right. It was important that everyone in the audience could see the witch's legs sticking out from under that house, so there was some shuffling about of that wing during the setting up to ensure the seat on the right could see the legs.

Discuss with the Caretaker if any decisions have been made regarding a centre or side aisles, as this will affect the seats for your sight lines. Sometimes it is the Producer who can influence where the audience seating aisles will be, but more often than not it is the local fire authority that has laid down rules for that particular hall..



**Vertical sight lines** Is there a balcony? Are the audience seats raked? If so then you'll have to paint the tops of steps, tables etc. Any borders (or are you going to paint some?) If there is a balcony, go up into it and view the stage from there to check just how far down the borders hang, How much will the borders, or pros. arch, mask the scenery at the back of the stage?

**If you are painting on the stage or touching up the scenery once you have moved the set in? Then....**

Is it all right to paint scenery on the stage? -"Of course I'll be very careful not to smear the curtains Mr. Caretaker and I'll lay down tarpaulins".

If there's something going on in the hall, (five-a-side football match for instance) if I draw the main curtains can I still keep on working?

If it's a raked stage or auditorium is it worth asking if you could paint the stage floor?

**STORING MATERIALS** Anywhere I can make my "paint-store"? Will the paint store floor need covering?

**THE HALL** Where's the nearest entrance for me to get my car (full of paints) parked? Must obviously try to avoid a long trudge moving the materials. Where can I wash my brushes? Can I get a bucket under the tap? What hours, and days, will the hall be open, for me to get in and work? Any chance of letting myself in and out when the hall is closed? Any chance of a set of keys? Where are the light switches?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN - PERSPECTIVE

*"Oh my dear- how beautiful perspective is"* Allegedly spoken by Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) to his wife, on waking in the

middle of the night.

If Perspective is a closed book to you, then skip the following section. But I strongly advise you chat to a friendly artist who can give you a rough idea of how Perspective "works". There are many books devoted to the subject, some delving deeply into the geometry; but you really don't need to know all that for our purpose.

**A FEW EASY PRINCIPLES** It's not complicated, honestly it's not. It's something we all acknowledge.....

1. Things appear smaller, the further away they actually are. The most quoted example is- standing in the middle of a road and observing the telephone poles on either side of that road as they seem to disappear into the distance.

2 Door frames; arches etc. have thickness. IT HAS BEEN MY LIFE'S CRUSADE TO BRING MORE "THICKNESS" INTO STAGE SCENERY PAINTING. Of course if you are building a box set complete with actual door reveals etc. then this doesn't apply

3. What you see depends on from where you are looking at it.

A smattering of perspective will give you a very powerful tool to increase the realism of your set.

### THE SPECTATOR'S VIEW OF THINGS

When you are standing at the kitchen doorway you can't see under the table yet you CAN see under the top shelf? Next lets get down on our hands and knees (That's confused the dog for a start!). Now you CAN see under the table

Transfer that simple observation to a backcloth for the Giant's Kitchen in Jack and the Beanstalk and lo and behold, you- and more importantly the audience from where they are sitting- SHOULD be able to see under the Giant's table.



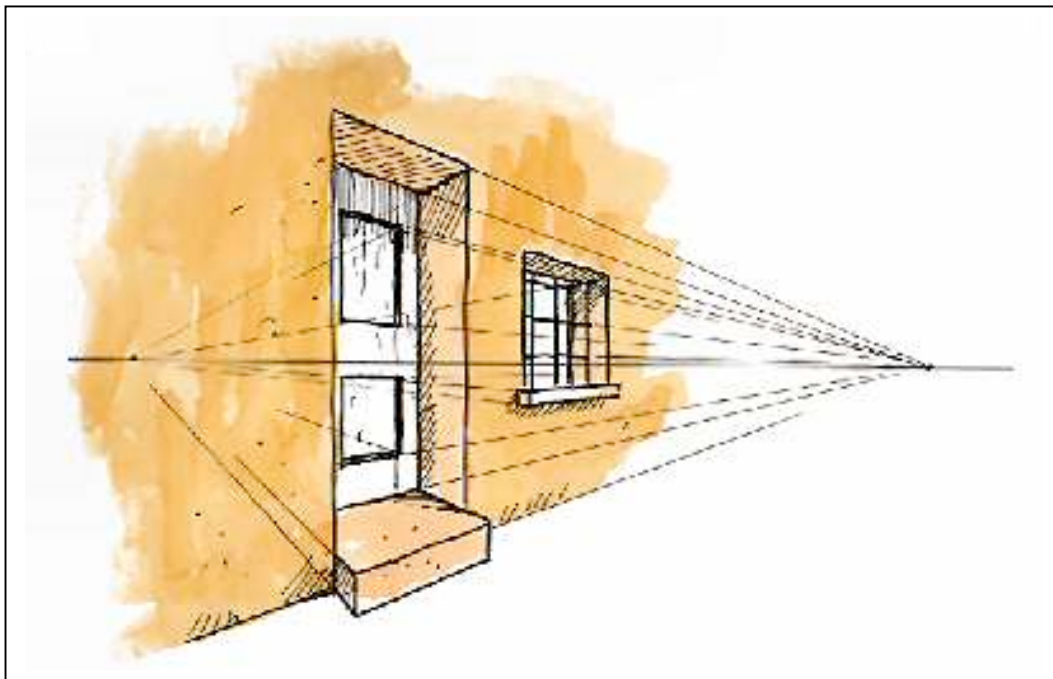


So what you see, and more importantly in our case, what you EXPECT to see, depends upon your observation point.... where you are sitting/standing in other words.

So if we paint a scene as viewed from a certain angle, this forces the audience to also "see" our painting from that same angle.

Most people can grasp the basics of flat plane perspective such as looking under a table; seeing the edge thickness of a door frame, or looking down on a door step, but up under a lintel.

The drawing on the below shows the horizontal Eye-line and the construction lines merging at the two vanishing points. (left and right).



#### **WHICH SEAT ARE YOU PAINTING FOR?**

First of all a word about the name EYE LINE. It is often also called the HORIZON LINE and both refer to the same geometric construction line. However, I prefer "Eye line" as that word "Horizon" appears to assume you are referring to the actual horizon. This is not necessarily the case - especially if you are amongst mountains when the perspective "Horizon Line" might be nowhere near the horizon of the mountain range. Eye line or Horizon line - your vanishing points will be plotted along this line.

In theatres with raked (sloping) seating in theory only one row of the audience will see the sets correctly if you slavishly stick to perspective rules. And to be pedantic only one of those seats will see it as you had planned, because thicknesses of windows/doors frames etc. will 'move' depending upon the angle from which they are viewed. In real life, as we walk about together, we each see a slightly different view of the same scene. (As we also all see a different rainbow) But of course in the theatre all the audience is presented with your same scene.

## ROYAL BOX

Historically when painting cloths/flats in correct perspective, the Eye Line used to be set at the same height as the "Royal Box" There aren't many Royal Boxes about in school halls these days where our scenery is going to be seen, so where do you pitch your line? Well I usually have a different line for each scene! You'll be the only person who knows that.... The audience (and cast) never seem to notice in any case.

Usually in school assembly halls the stage is about 4 feet off the ground. This means that the audiences' "eye line" comes a few inches up from the bottom of the scenery. Not a happy placing, but can be used effectively for certain scenes.

The drawing on above shows the eye-line at the audiences' "eye line" with two vanishing points arrowed. One for the steps and one for the cottage.

